

# ENDING CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY IN NEW MEXICO

Derek Lin, MPH | March 2021

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## INTRODUCTION

All children need access to nutritious food in order to be healthy. Food security – having reliable access to adequate amounts of nutritious food – is a social determinant for both physical and mental health, and children with consistent access to fresh produce perform better in school and are better equipped to meet developmental milestones, helping them build a strong foundation for future success. Unfortunately, the high rates of food insecurity in New Mexico prevent many children from reaching their full potential. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened child food insecurity, making it more urgent than ever to take immediate action on this issue.

Evidence-based programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and tax credits like New Mexico's Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and Low-Income Comprehensive Tax Rebate (LICTR), help New Mexicans gain financial security and address the root causes of food insecurity. However, when there are barriers to accessing these programs, or when they are underfunded, many families are forced to choose between healthy food and other basic household needs. By taking a holistic approach to solving the joint epidemics of financial and food insecurity, we can ensure that all New Mexico families have reliable access to nutritious food during the pandemic and beyond.

### Definitions

**Food Insecurity:** Limited or uncertain access to adequate food for an active, healthy life due to lack of money and other resources.<sup>1</sup>

**Hunger:** A potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.<sup>2</sup>

**Food Desert:** Geographic area at least 1 mile (in urban settings) or 10 miles (in rural settings) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store.<sup>3</sup>

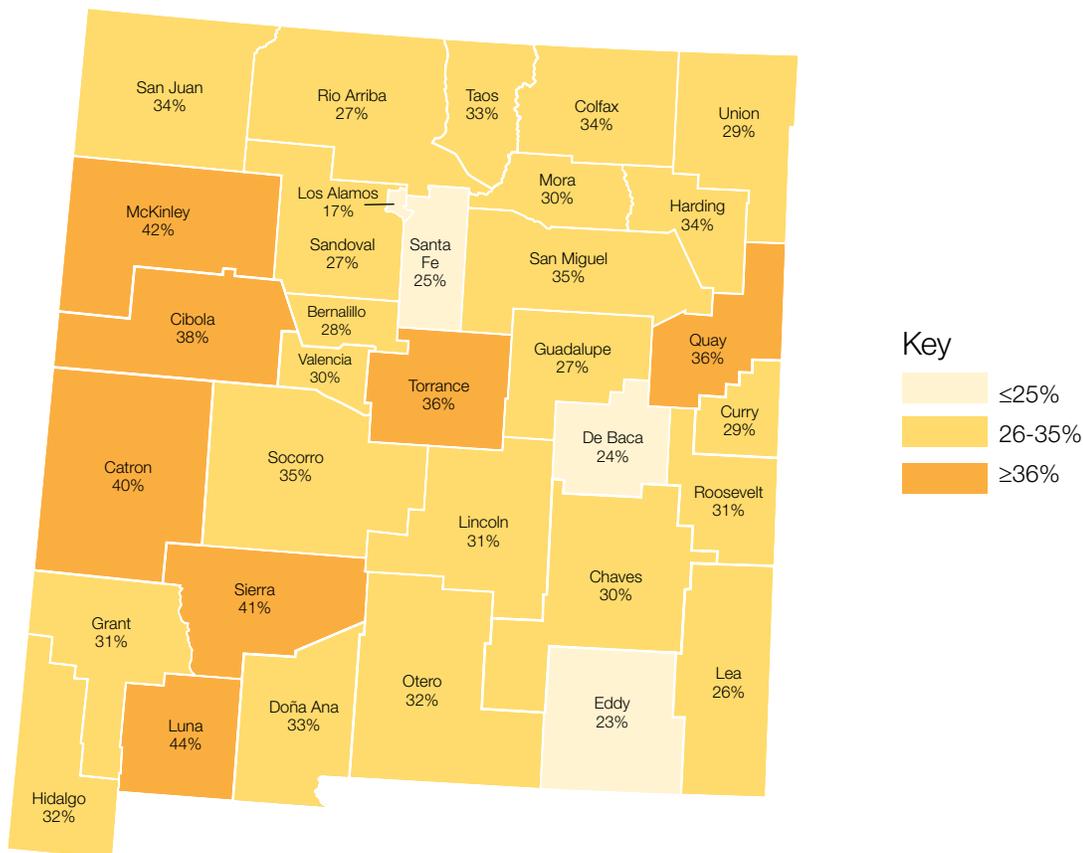


# FOOD INSECURITY IN NEW MEXICO

## FIGURE I

### The Pandemic has Worsened Childhood Food Insecurity

Share of children projected to be food insecure by county (2020)



Source: This Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020. Feeding America, 2020

New Mexico has long had one of the worst rates of child food insecurity in the country. One out of three New Mexico children are projected to have experienced food insecurity at some point in 2020,<sup>4</sup> which is up from pre-COVID-19 levels of one in four. Due to COVID-19, rates of food insecurity in some counties were as high as 44% in 2020 (see Figure I). Children ages 0 to 3 experienced even higher rates of food insecurity at 36%, compared to 24% nationally.<sup>5</sup> Food insecurity, which is defined as limited or uncertain access to food,<sup>6</sup> is most prevalent among families of color and

those living in food deserts or poverty – meaning a household income of less than \$25,750 a year for a family of four. In 2019, 25% of New Mexico children lived in poverty, which is the third highest rate in the country.<sup>7</sup> Poverty is a major determinant of food insecurity because lower-income families often have to make trade-offs between purchasing food and other basic needs since food costs make up a larger share of their household budget. New Mexico households with annual income of less than \$15,000 –

which are disproportionately Black, Native American, and Hispanic – spend on average 33% of their income on food compared to 4% for households earning more than \$70,000<sup>8</sup> (see Figure II). SNAP usage, which can be considered a proxy for measuring food insecurity, also reveals disparities by race and ethnicity (see Figure III). Because SNAP is supplemental, benefits do not provide all of the food a family needs over the course of a month, so families receiving SNAP benefits may still be food insecure.

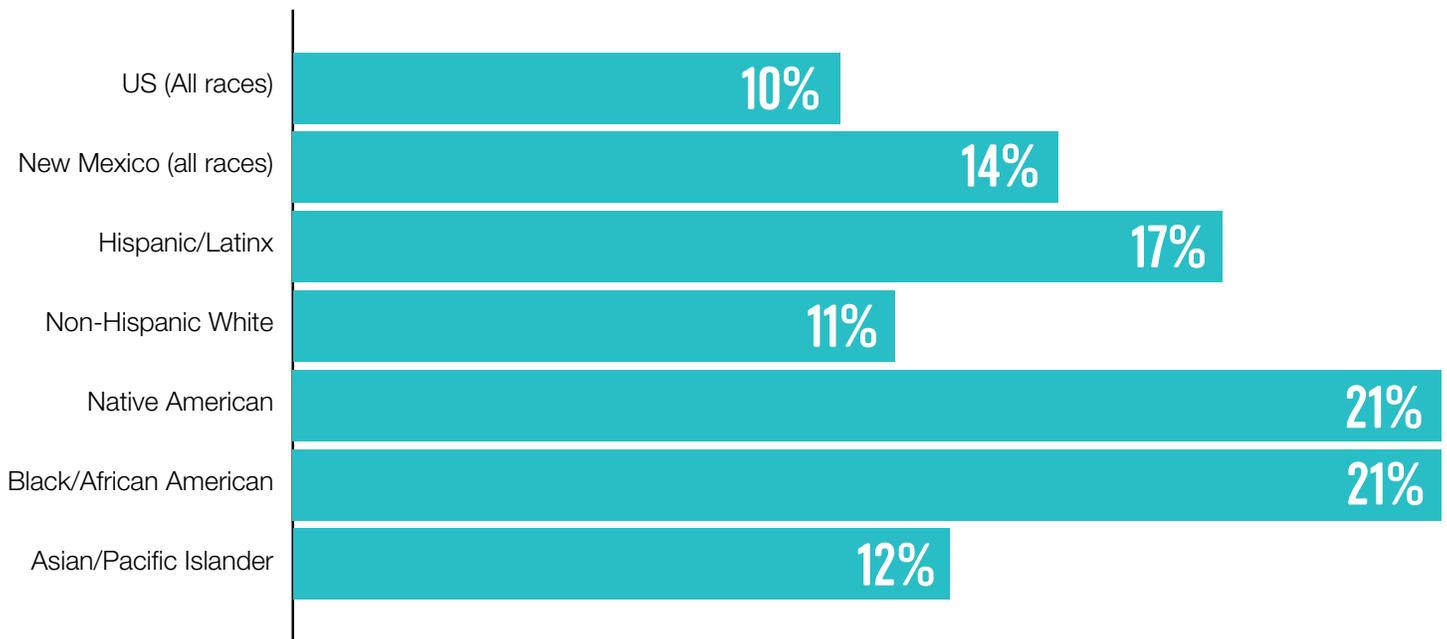
## FIGURE II

### Families Earning Less Than \$15,000, Who are More Likely to be Families of Color, Spend the Largest Share of Their Income on Food

Share of household income spent on food by income group (2019)



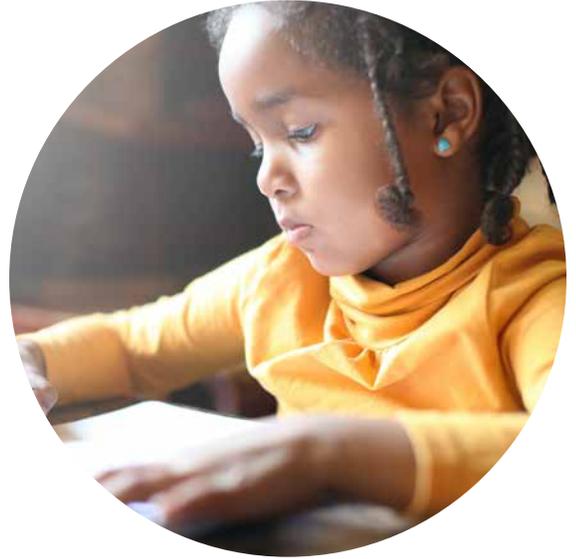
Share of New Mexico families earning less than \$15,000 by race and ethnicity (2019)



Sources: Consumer Expenditures Survey. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019 American Community Survey Data. US Census Bureau, 2019

“At school, there are times when some of the kids can’t focus because they don’t have money for food. And because they didn’t eat well, they don’t sleep well, so they don’t even get to school on time. So they don’t even get to eat breakfast. So some of these kids don’t even get to eat at all at home. They eat at school, but sometimes only once a day.”

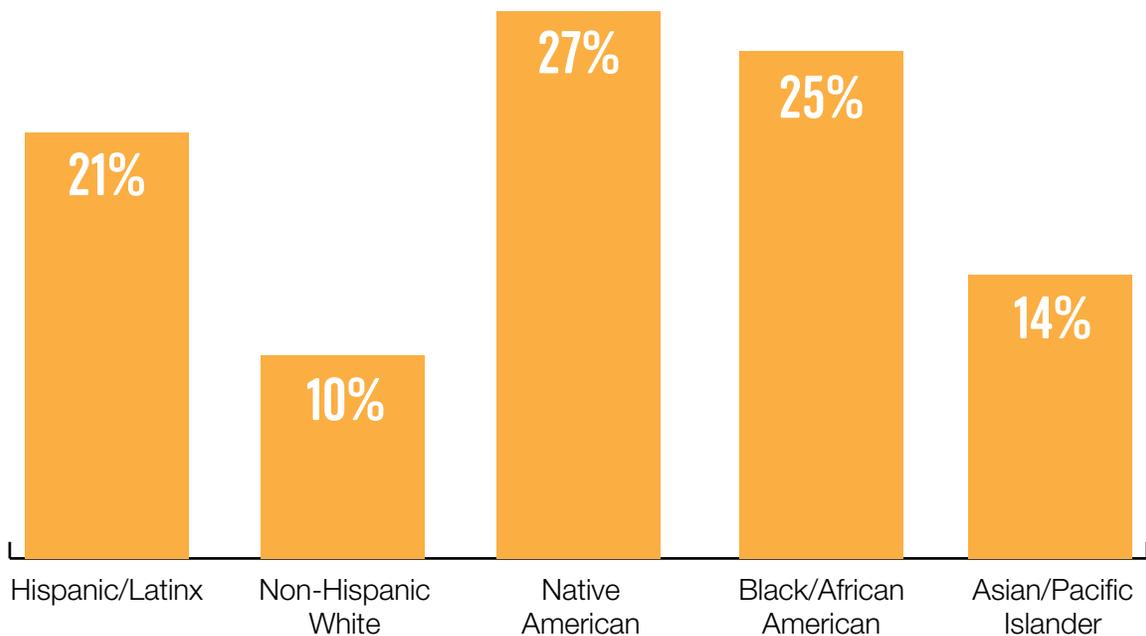
-McKinley County community member



### FIGURE III

#### Families of Color in New Mexico are More Likely to Receive SNAP Benefits

Households receiving SNAP by race and ethnicity (2019)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2019, Tables B22003, B22005B, B22005C, B22005D, B22005H, and B22005I



Although the full consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic remain to be seen, it is already clear that communities of color have been hit the hardest.<sup>9</sup> This public health crisis and recession are likely to worsen long-standing disparities in poverty rates between different racial and ethnic groups in New Mexico. Before the pandemic, Native American children had disproportionately higher rates of poverty (41%) compared to non-Hispanic white children (14%).<sup>10</sup> This income inequity contributes to racial and ethnic disparities in food insecurity. In 2018, 24% of Hispanic households and 17% of Black households experienced food insecurity. Native American households experienced the highest rate at 27% while non-Hispanic white households had the lowest rate at 10%.<sup>11</sup> In McKinley County, for example, where the population is 75% Native American, 42% of children are projected to have experienced food insecurity in 2020, roughly twice the national average.<sup>12</sup> The high rate of food insecurity among Native American communities stems from a multitude

of factors including a long history of structural inequities, systemic racism, and the theft of their lands where ancestors grew and hunted food that stripped tribal people of their food sovereignty. Furthermore, large COVID-19 outbreaks in counties with majority Native American populations have exacerbated food insecurity in many communities that already experienced high rates.<sup>13</sup>

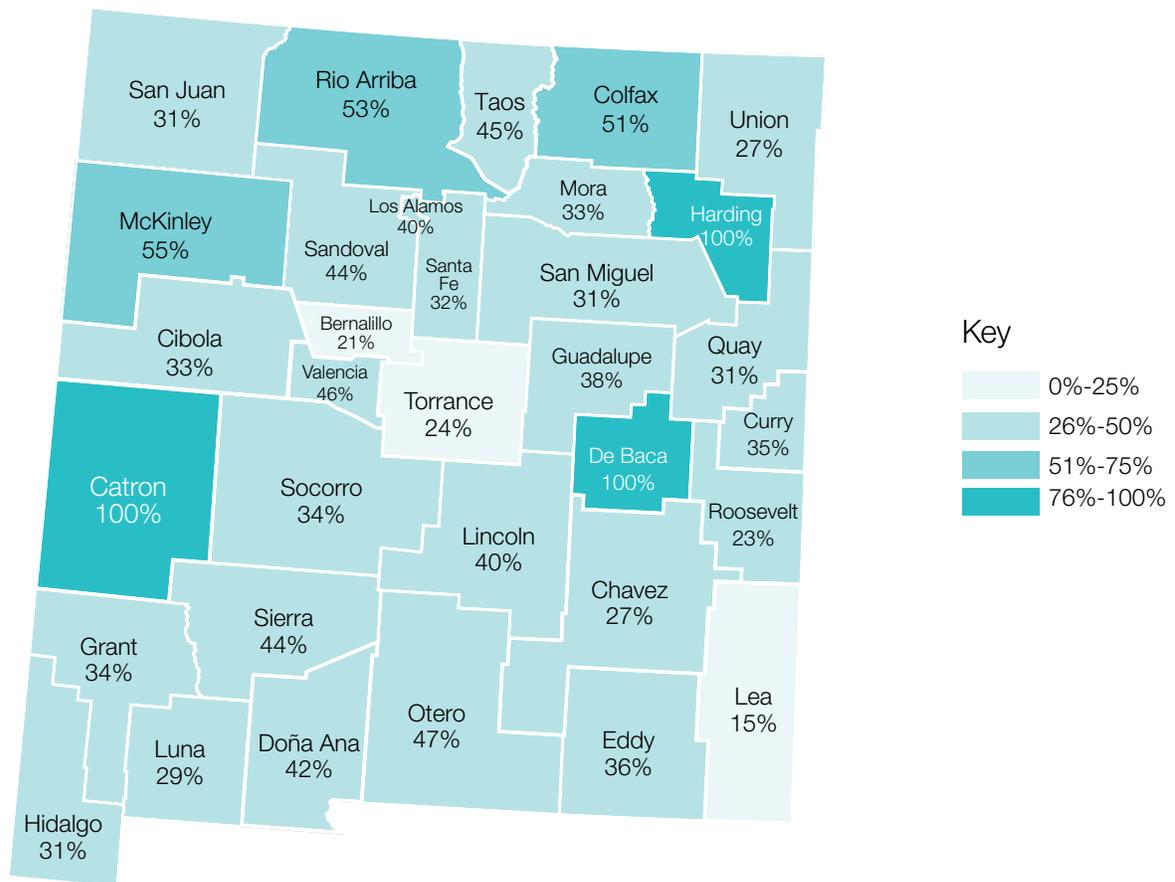
The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a dramatic increase in demand for emergency food support from organizations such as food banks,<sup>14</sup> and upwards of 14% of New Mexican households with children report needing help securing food.<sup>15</sup> This increased demand has strained the emergency food system, particularly in rural areas and food deserts, which already face numerous difficulties in food access. Nearly 30% of New Mexicans live in a food desert,<sup>16</sup> meaning they live either 1 mile (in urban settings) or 10 miles (in rural settings) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store (see Figure IV). High-poverty areas, which are census tracts where at least 30% of the population lives

at or below the poverty level, are more likely than higher-income areas to be food deserts. As with other indicators, disparities along racial and ethnic lines are also seen in high-poverty areas (see Figure V). Limited access to nutritious food and fresh produce is a significant barrier to healthy dietary choices for rural and frontier communities in particular. Grocery stores in rural areas often lack fresh produce and families end up depending on lower-quality processed foods and unhealthy junk foods for subsistence. Additionally, inadequate rural transportation infrastructure disproportionately impacts New Mexico's Native American communities. Poorly maintained roads and the absence of public transportation can make it difficult to get to the store and even impossible during bad weather.<sup>17</sup> To complicate matters more, the lack of cold storage in these areas severely limits the ability of the emergency food support system (e.g. food banks and school feeding programs) to provide these communities with fresh and healthy food.

# FIGURE IV

## Three New Mexico Counties are Complete Food Deserts

Share of the population with low access\* to a grocery store by county (2015)



Source: "Food Access Research Atlas Data File," U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, released August 2015

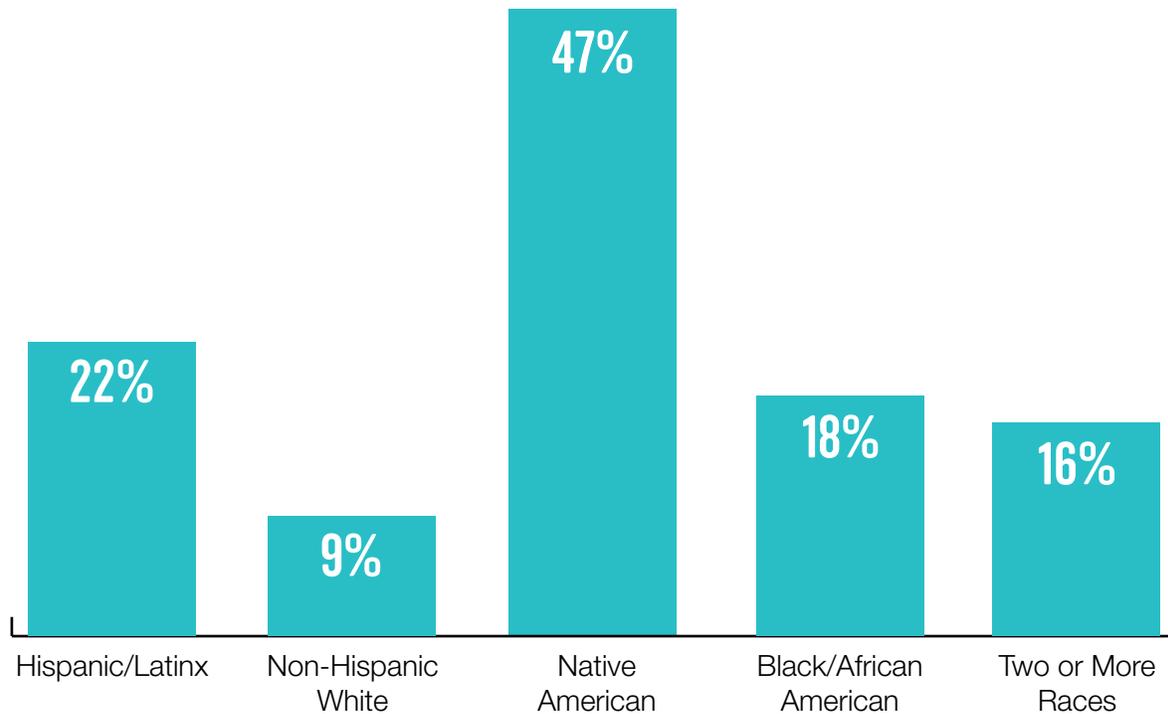
\*Food access indicators for census tracts use 1-mile demarcations to the nearest supermarket for urban areas and 10-mile demarcations to the nearest supermarket for rural areas.



## FIGURE V

### Children of Color in New Mexico are More Likely to Live in High-Poverty Areas

Children living in high-poverty areas by race and ethnicity (2014-2018)



Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey data, 2014-2018

Note: Estimates for other races and ethnicities is not available because the confidence interval around the percentage is greater than or equal to 10 percentage points.

New Mexico's immigrant communities have faced many threats to food security, in part due to numerous attacks by the Trump Administration. The 'public charge' rule change penalized the use of safety net programs including SNAP, Medicaid, and Section 8 housing for some non-citizens who have historically been eligible for them. Even though the Biden administration plans to reverse the public charge rule change, it has already resulted in serious consequences for immigrant families. Once the public charge rule change was announced, non-citizens, as well as their citizen family members, reported avoiding enrolling in SNAP out of fear of deportation.<sup>18</sup> This 'chilling effect,' coupled with the exclusion of many immigrants from federal COVID-19 pandemic relief,<sup>19</sup> will likely worsen food insecurity in immigrant communities. While no region-specific data are available on

food insecurity among New Mexico's immigrant and refugee communities, foreign-born Hispanics nationwide have higher rates of food insecurity than do U.S.-born Hispanics.<sup>20</sup>

Hunger and food insecurity among students in higher education is often overlooked, in part due to preconceived notions about college students coming from better-resourced families. In fact, as of 2018, 26% of undergraduate students were in households earning incomes at or below the poverty line.<sup>21</sup> More than 70% of college students were non-traditional, meaning they are financially independent from their parents. Non-traditional students likely started college late, may be a caregiver, and may maintain a job outside of school.<sup>22</sup> A recent survey of undergraduate students at the University of New Mexico found that 37% of respondents had experienced food insecurity within

the past 30 days.<sup>23</sup> Some national data on college food insecurity during the pandemic shows that rates are even higher for community college students. In addition, Black students experience food insecurity at rates 19% higher than do white students.<sup>24</sup> The federal SNAP regulations restrict college students from accessing SNAP, based on the assumption that many are financially dependent on their parents. There are some exemptions for this rule including: students who are parents of young children, work more than 20 hours a week, or are enrolled in employment and training programs. Unfortunately, up to 18% of New Mexico's college students may be eligible for SNAP but only 6% are enrolled, meaning the state is missing out on more than \$22 million in federal resources to help address student hunger.<sup>25</sup>

# FOOD INSECURITY AND POPULATION HEALTH



“[My son] gets a lot of not-great-for-him foods, just to make sure he’s getting enough to eat”

-Albuquerque community member

Food insecurity takes many forms and not everyone who is food insecure experiences hunger. Some households report having to skip meals whereas others depend on calorie-dense and lower-quality foods that do not satisfy basic nutritional requirements. Regardless of the reason, the consequences of childhood food insecurity follow a person over their lifetime. Children who experience even a marginal level of household food insecurity are more likely to develop behavioral, academic, and emotional problems.<sup>26</sup> Parents report that the frustration, anxiety, and depression caused by food insecurity negatively impacts their children’s physical

and mental health, contributing to behavioral problems at school.<sup>27</sup> Children in households experiencing food insecurity are at a higher risk of impaired cognitive and physical development than are those in food-secure households.<sup>28</sup>

Cheaper foods and those with processed grains, fats, and sugars are associated with higher rates of childhood obesity and diabetes.<sup>29,30</sup> Therefore, children in food-insecure households are also at a higher risk of being overweight and having diabetes, in part due to overconsumption of calorie-dense, nutritionally poor foods.<sup>31,32</sup> A recent study found that adults who experienced food insecurity as

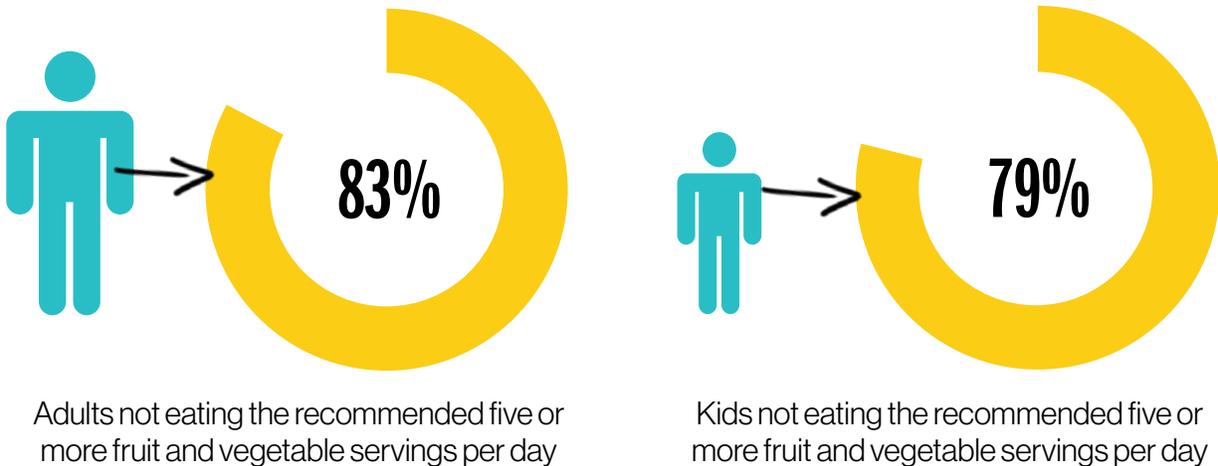
children had higher rates of lifetime chronic health conditions such as asthma and depression, and are more likely to forgo necessary medical care.<sup>33</sup> These higher rates of chronic conditions increase health care costs, perpetuating the cycle of poverty by adding a significant financial burden on families already experiencing material hardship. Food insecurity ends up costing, on average, \$1,914 in excess medical costs each year for an individual.<sup>34</sup> Obesity is associated with an increased risk of lifelong chronic illness management that can amount to more than \$150,000 in excess medical costs over a lifetime.<sup>35</sup>

# FOOD SPENDING AND FOOD CHOICES

## FIGURE VI

### Most New Mexicans Are Not Eating Enough Fruits and Vegetables

Share of adults and children not eating the recommended five or six servings of fruit and vegetables per day (2018)



Source: NM Department of Health, Health Indicator Report - Fruit and Vegetable Consumption, NM-IBIS



Money and time are both barriers to families trying to make healthy food choices. Fresh, nutritious foods take more time to prepare and are generally more expensive than processed foods, which can make them impractical choices for low-income families. Those facing cost constraints purchase less fresh produce and lean meats. In New Mexico, 79% of children and 83% of adults are not eating enough fruits and vegetables<sup>36</sup> (Figure VI). In addition, parents in food-insecure households may have trouble affording foods that are culturally appropriate or that align with dietary restrictions or food allergies.

“Just buying the fresh fruits and vegetables is expensive. My 1-year-old daughter loves fresh cherries – they were \$1.98 a pound two weeks ago. Now they are \$3.98 a pound. So she was looking at the cherries and we just had to pass by. And the poor thing was crying and we can’t change anything. Not with the money that we have available – we get by with what we have. Sometimes all we have left is bologna and bread. And they expect us to eat healthy and we can’t. There is just no way.”

-McKinley County community member

# CURRENT PROGRAMS



Federal- and state-level public assistance programs such as TANF and SNAP, tax credits, and other income supports have been shown to increase spending on food and decrease food insecurity.<sup>37-39</sup> Food pantries are also a valuable resource for filling in some of the meal gaps faced by low-income families and can help supplement public assistance programs. Unfortunately, even accounting for public assistance and food pantries, it is estimated that low-income New Mexicans still miss 13% of their meals – or three meals a week.<sup>40</sup>

## **SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – what used to be called food stamps – is a highly effective program aimed at reducing food insecurity by increasing the recipient's spending power on food, which then indirectly allows for increases in spending on housing, education,

and transportation, and offsets other forms of material and financial hardship that families earning low incomes face. New Mexico has the largest share of residents enrolled in SNAP (21.1%) in the nation.<sup>41</sup>

The benefits of SNAP participation on the health and well-being of its recipients are well documented. SNAP benefits have been shown to improve math and reading scores for children in kindergarten through third grade,<sup>42</sup> and SNAP enrollment is associated with not having to repeat grades.<sup>43</sup> Early childhood access to SNAP promotes healthy developmental and cognitive outcomes, thereby improving performance at school, increasing economic mobility, and decreasing the risk of chronic disease.<sup>44-46</sup> Unfortunately, SNAP benefit amounts are often too low to empower families to make the healthiest food choices. SNAP benefit amounts are based on the USDA's "Thrifty Food Plan" that expects most meals to be prepared from scratch, requiring up to 8 hours more per week than the average amount of time families spend preparing meals,<sup>47</sup> an unrealistic expectation

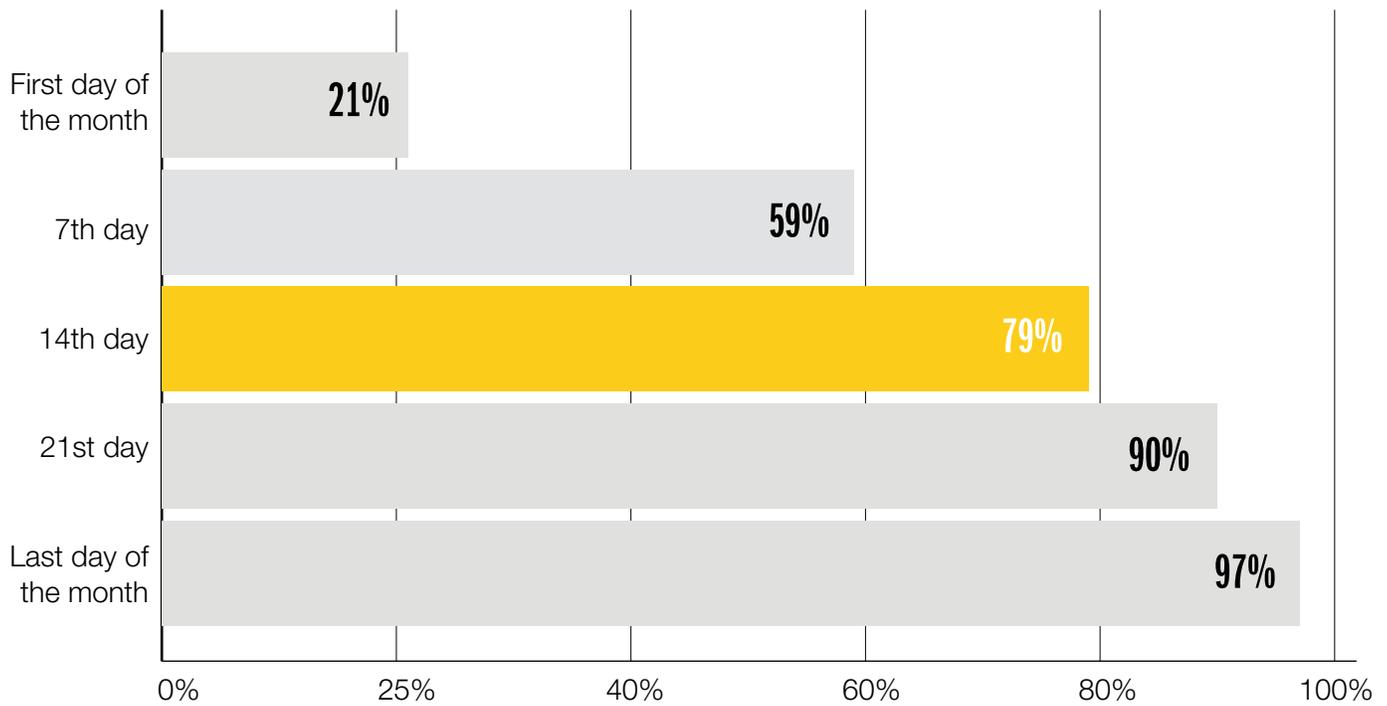
for working families. And, because they are "supplemental," SNAP benefits do not meet a family's entire food needs. Typically, 80% of SNAP benefits are used up within the first half of the month<sup>48</sup> (see Figure VII). Towards the end of the benefit cycle, SNAP-receiving families are often forced to make a choice between food and other basic necessities meaning they eat less, have a lower quality of diet, and experience more food insecurity and hunger.<sup>49</sup> More than 60% of New Mexico families with low food security report having to make the choice between paying utilities and buying food<sup>50</sup> (see Figure VIII).

As part of the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act, New Mexico was able to increase benefit amounts for all SNAP recipients up to the maximum amount available based on the size of their household.<sup>51</sup> While this move helped many low-income households who were receiving less than the maximum amount of SNAP benefits, it did nothing to help the lowest-income households already receiving the maximum amounts.

## FIGURE VII

### Most SNAP Benefits are Exhausted by the Middle of the Month

Share of SNAP benefits that have been used by week (2011)

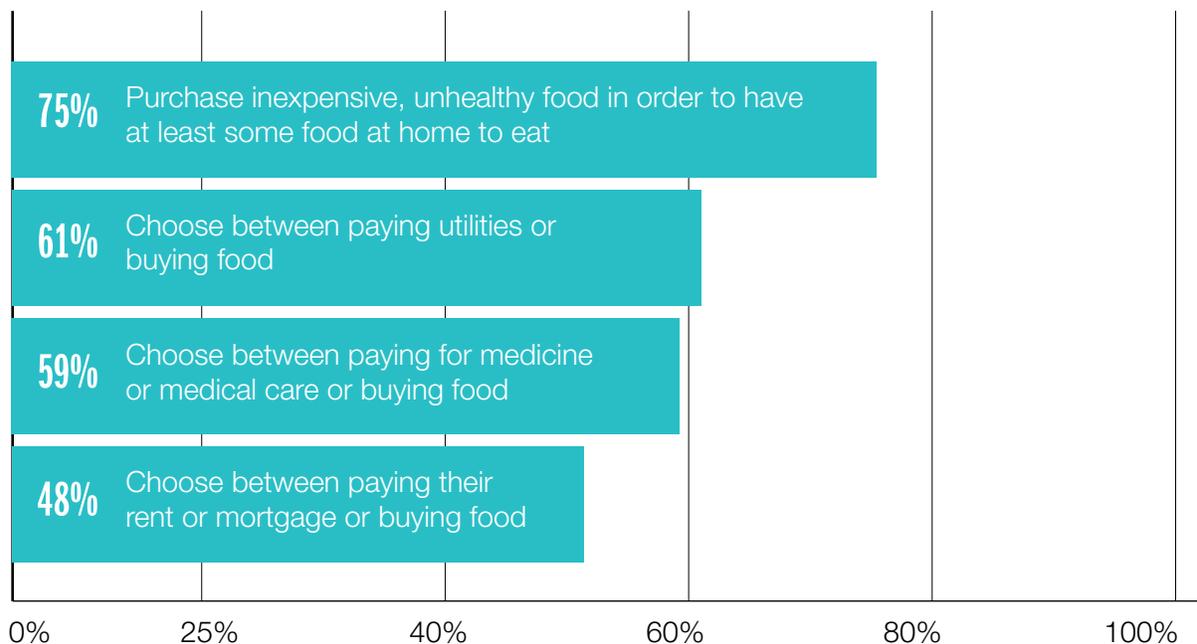


Source: "Benefit Redemption Patterns in SNAP," USDA, 2011

## FIGURE VIII

### New Mexicans with Low Food Security Must Make Tradeoffs in Order to Get By

Share of New Mexicans with low food security making tradeoffs by type of choice (2014)



Sources: NM Association of Food Banks Survey and Map the Meal Gap, 2014

## FOOD BANKS

There is a network of five food banks that provide emergency food relief for families throughout New Mexico. Many food insecure New Mexico families do not qualify for federal nutrition programs, which can be due to factors such as immigration status or household income, so they depend on local food banks for support. Food banks have always had an important role in improving food security. Before the pandemic, the largest food bank in the state, Roadrunner Food Bank, provided food for 70,000 New Mexicans each week.<sup>52</sup> The pandemic increased the demand for emergency food relief and from March through April of 2020, the two largest food banks in New Mexico spent \$1.65 million purchasing food for New Mexicans in need.<sup>53</sup>

## SCHOOL MEALS

The federal school meals program is a highly effective option for ensuring school-age children have access to nutritious food. In New Mexico, 75% of students participate in the free and reduced-price school lunch program.<sup>54</sup> Meals during the school day are essential for students living in severely food insecure households and, for some, may be the only regular meals they receive. Now that schools have transitioned to remote learning because of COVID-19, students participating in these programs have had difficulty accessing school meals. As a result, many school districts throughout the state are providing grab-and-go meals, typically making them available to all students regardless of school meal program eligibility. Families with students who receive free or reduced-price school meals can also participate in the Pandemic-EBT program, where families receive SNAP benefits as a replacement for missed school meals.<sup>55</sup> Continuing

to offer school meals or expanding access to them during the pandemic and beyond will require increasing and maximizing funding and leveraging the infrastructure of the school system.

## DOUBLE UP FOOD BUCKS (DUFEB)

The state-funded DUFEB program, operated by the New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association, doubles the spending power for SNAP recipients by matching SNAP benefits dollar-for-dollar when spent on fresh produce grown locally. The DUFEB program is available at 80 locations across New Mexico including 41 farmers' markets, but also some grocery stores, farm stands, community-supported agriculture, and mobile markets, which makes it easier for New Mexicans in rural communities to access healthy food. In 2018, SNAP recipients in New Mexico spent more than \$1 million in combined SNAP and DUFEB, a nearly three-fold increase from \$354,000 in 2015.<sup>56</sup> Of the DUFEB participants, 75% said their families are eating more fruits and vegetables and 57% are eating less junk food. By incentivizing SNAP spending on fresh produce at farmers' markets, more families have access to healthy food, making New Mexico healthier while supporting small, local growers. As a result of DUFEB, three out of four participating farmers report making more money and more than a quarter plan to hire new staff. Programs like DUFEB connect consumers to a network of local producers, strengthening the local food system and economy.

## HEAT AND EAT

Federal law allows families who receive at least \$20 a month in energy assistance an increase in their SNAP benefits. This is known informally as the "Heat and Eat" program. States can provide this energy assistance through the federally funded Low

Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). However, LIHEAP is only available to families who pay a heating or cooling bill separately from their rent. This leaves many New Mexicans whose utilities are included in their rent ineligible for the increased SNAP benefits afforded by Heat and Eat.

## CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM (CACFP)

The CACFP reimburses the costs of meals for eligible children in community-based child care programs including child care centers, day care homes, Head Start programs, family child care homes, after-school care programs, and emergency shelters. This funding addresses food insecurity for young children at a critical time for brain development, promoting better cognitive and health outcomes.<sup>57</sup> However, New Mexico's participation in this program has fallen dramatically putting us behind the rest of the country. In 2018, only 7,890 New Mexico children participated in CACFP in home child care settings.<sup>58</sup> This represents a 40% drop from 2013, compared to a 9% drop nationally. Among child care centers, CACFP participation in New Mexico increased by only 19%, compared to a 36% increase nationally during this time frame.

## TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES (TANF)

Federally funded TANF is a critical, but underutilized and underfunded anti-poverty program that provides cash assistance to families with children who earn very low incomes or are between jobs. Cash assistance helps parents afford basic household needs including diapers, clothing, and housing, allowing families to spend more



money on food. Cash assistance is one of the most effective ways to eliminate child poverty, according to a recent National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine report.<sup>59</sup>

## **Progress from the Regular 2020 Legislative Session**

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has made ending child food insecurity a high priority. In working toward this end, policymakers passed several pieces of legislation during the 2020 regular legislative session, including:

### **A State-level “Heat and Eat” Program Was Created in Statute**

By creating a state-funded energy assistance program during the 2020 regular session, legislators helped ensure all SNAP-eligible families could take advantage of the Heat and Eat benefit, regardless of whether they pay a separate heating/cooling bill. With a \$1.5 million investment, the state will be providing energy assistance to 68,000 SNAP-eligible households – almost one-third of

all SNAP households, about half of which have children – making these families eligible for up to \$90 per month in increased SNAP benefits. Every SNAP dollar spent generates \$1.70 in economic activity, circulating tens of millions of dollars through the local economy. By establishing this program in law, the state has ensured it will continue through successive administrations.

### **Co-pays Were Eliminated for Reduced-price School Breakfast and Lunch**

House Bill 10 appropriated almost \$540,000 to the NM Public Education Department to eliminate co-pays for almost 12,500 students living at 185% of the federal poverty level. These small co-pays add up over the course of the school year and are a significant barrier for students’ access to school breakfast and lunch.

### **Funding Was Increased for New Mexico Grown Fruits and Vegetables for School Meals Program**

More than \$330,000 was appropriated for the fiscal year 2021 budget. This funding went to the NM Public Education Department to expand the New Mexico Grown Fruits and Vegetables for School Meals Program, to increase the availability of fruits and vegetables for students while supporting local growers and food systems.

### **Funding Was Increased for TANF Transition Bonus Program**

The NM Human Services Department received an appropriation of \$1.8 million in federal funding for the TANF Transition Bonus Program, which provides \$200 per month for up to 18 months for TANF participants who maintain at least 30 hours in paid employment per week. This program is meant to support parents in low-income families as they transition back into the workforce. Unfortunately, using federal funds makes the program difficult to administer and will likely result in a low participation rate due to the burdensome reporting requirements associated with federal funding.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Even in light of these victories, much more work needs to be done – particularly in the wake of the pandemic, which hit after the 2020 regular session was over. Among our policy recommendations, we urge policymakers to:

## **EXPAND TAX CREDITS FOR NEW MEXICO'S FAMILIES**

Refundable tax credits are an evidence-based approach for ensuring that working families have more money to spend on food and other household goods – money that supports local economies all around the state. Such policies, like the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), improve health outcomes for parents, infants, and children, and children in families that receive them do better in school, are more likely to attend college, and earn more as adults, helping break the cycle of poverty.<sup>60</sup> New Mexico can continue to take advantage of the anti-poverty benefits of tax credits by: increasing the Working Families Tax Credit from 17% to 20% of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (at a cost of \$16 million); increasing the credit amount even more for parents of young children (\$7-\$13 million); ending the exclusion for tax filers using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (\$5 million); and ending the exclusion for young adult workers without children (\$2 million). New Mexico should also consider enacting a new Child Tax Credit that would benefit all families with children (\$60+ million).

## **INCREASE THE LOW-INCOME COMPREHENSIVE TAX REBATE (LICTR) AND INDEX**

## **IT TO INFLATION**

LICTR is only available to New Mexico households earning \$22,000 a year or less. This policy was last amended in 1998 and has since lost much of its value due to inflation. Indexing LICTR to inflation from 1998 and expanding eligibility to households earning up to \$36,000 a year would help lift approximately 6,000 more households out of poverty (\$30 million).

## **FULLY FUND FOOD BANKS, FOOD PANTRIES, AND SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS**

More than ever, New Mexicans are depending on food assistance programs to meet their nutritional needs. This increased demand during the pandemic has put significant strain on these systems, which have had to adapt in order to provide critical food support for more New Mexicans. The state can help strengthen the food assistance system and promote food security throughout the pandemic and after by ensuring that food banks, food pantries, and school meal programs are fully funded.

## **EXPAND DOUBLE UP FOOD BUCKS**

Increasing funding for DUFEB would expand these benefits for eligible New Mexicans while further developing New Mexico's local food and farming systems. Increased funding could also support outreach in rural areas to build more awareness of the program, attract local producers to sell at retail outlets, and be used to hire staff to help relieve the administrative

burden of the smaller markets that participate in DUFEB. In addition to funding, SNAP recipient participation in DUFEB could be further incentivized by including more grocery stores in the DUFEB program. This would support a more extensive network of outlets for DUFEB participants to choose from and allow families to take advantage of the program when farmers' markets are not open or are out of season.

## **INCREASE VISIBILITY OF SNAP AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Many college students aren't aware that they may be SNAP-eligible. Increasing awareness through outreach would help normalize and reduce the stigma of SNAP reciprocity for students in both 2- and 4-year degree programs. Institutions can do this by making materials and resources for enrolling in food and nutrition programs available to students during orientation and use information from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid forms to inform students about SNAP eligibility. States can also let school enrollment count towards SNAP work requirements, remove work requirements for full-time students, and develop criteria for institutions to be designated "hunger-free campuses." Other steps include allowing SNAP purchases at on-campus retailers, and expanding on-campus food pantries, food recovery programs, or dining center meal donation programs.

## **REMOVE WORK REQUIREMENTS FOR TEMPORARY**

## ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES

TANF participation has dropped in large part due to work requirements enacted during the last recession. Unless work requirements are paired with programs that help families increase their skills and education, they ultimately do not improve workforce participation rates and instead are associated with increases in deep poverty.<sup>61</sup> New Mexico should remove the work requirements enacted in 2011, giving families more flexibility in accessing TANF benefits.

## INCREASE TANF BENEFITS

As the primary cash assistance program for families living in poverty, the purpose of TANF is to help families meet basic needs. Unfortunately, TANF benefits are insufficient for accomplishing this purpose. In New Mexico, benefits amount to only \$447 per month for a family of three, which equals a household income at 26% of the federal poverty level. The state's TANF benefit has not been increased since 1996, therefore increasing the benefit amount and indexing it to inflation would make TANF benefits more impactful for its recipients. The state can also use TANF to provide diaper stipends for families with young children. Families spend \$70 to \$80 a month on diapers for each child, and state funding of \$3 million would provide the almost 3,300 families on TANF with children ages 0 to 3 with a diaper stipend,<sup>62</sup> helping offset an unavoidable expense of raising children. Another update to TANF that would make the program more impactful includes implementing a full pass-through policy, which allows TANF recipients to retain 100% of the child support payments that the state collects on their behalf. Furthermore, eliminating TANF time limits will give families a better chance at having the support

they need to achieve economic security.

## ELIMINATE AND CAP CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE CO-PAYMENTS

In New Mexico, single-parent families spend roughly 40% of their monthly income on child care.<sup>63</sup> Families with children under the age of 12 who participate in TANF are categorically eligible for child care assistance. Even though New Mexico transfers millions of dollars of federal TANF funds to the child care assistance program, less than 5% of TANF families in New Mexico receive this support, in part because of the costly co-payments. To increase access to child care assistance, New Mexico should eliminate co-payments for families earning less than 100% of the federal poverty level, which would only cost an additional \$3 million. Capping co-payments at 7% of income for everyone else would cost \$27 million. Reducing the out-of-pocket costs for child care can be an important way of making more of the family's budget available for food, while promoting the availability of high-quality child care benefitting both children and working parents.

## SUPPORT FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

## FOR TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Policymakers should consult, learn from, and work directly with tribal governments and organizations – such as the Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation and the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance – that promote food sovereignty for tribal communities. These groups have the most qualified experts on restoring New Mexico's Native food systems with culturally appropriate, place-based food practices, natural resource management, and sustainable economic and infrastructural development. They need to be at the forefront of developing the policy solutions that will most effectively address food insecurity and food sovereignty in Native communities.

## KEEP FOOD TAX-FREE

Taxing food is a regressive policy that would worsen inequities in food access by further straining the household budgets of food-insecure families. This policy would have broad consequences for public health by compromising financial security for many low-income New Mexicans.

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